

# Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours



## Time

### Roadblock:

- Parents often cite time as the single greatest barrier to volunteering, attending meetings, and joining decision-making committees at their children's school.
- These activities often are scheduled at times that interfere with work or other obligations.

### Detour:

- Be flexible in scheduling meetings and events.
- Try a mix of mornings, evenings, and weekends to allow every parent the opportunity to attend.
- Consider potluck dinners and brown bag lunches to meet the needs of working parents.
- Hold meetings at community centers, apartment buildings, church halls, parks, libraries, and the workplace to make it easier for parents to attend.
- Sponsor monthly community family events and use part of the time to hold a meeting to give information to parents and discuss important issues.

## Not Feeling Valued

### Roadblock:

- Some parents are not sure they have anything of value to contribute.
- They may feel intimidated by principals, teachers, and PTA leaders.
- These parents may have had unpleasant school experiences or may have limited education or low literacy levels.
- Parents whose experience with the law has been negative also may be reluctant or embarrassed to participate in some schools or programs that now require fingerprints for regular volunteers.
- Educators and administrators can reinforce these feelings if they consider uninvolved parents lacking in certain qualities or deficient in some way.

### Detour:

- Extend a personal welcome to parents who appear to be withdrawn or uncomfortable.
- Establish regular communication to build relationships with parents based on mutual respect and trust.
- This kind of relationship can help shed light on what is going on at home that may impact a parent being able to participate in school activities, such as dealing with a family illness, aging parent, or financial stress.
- Learn about their interests and abilities; actively seek opportunities at home or at school for parents to use their experience and talents to benefit the school in some way, and then value each and every contribution.
- For parents with low literacy levels, schools can make phone calls, home visits, or provide video messages.
- Schools can work with local libraries to form literacy groups and provide adult literacy and English as a second language programs.

## Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours, cont.



### Feeling Unwelcome

#### Roadblock:

- Parents may feel they are unwelcome in the school.
- Staff interactions, attitudes, and the physical appearance of some schools may convey an unwelcoming environment.

#### Detour:

- Provide in-service training to help all faculty and staff develop an awareness of the importance of parent involvement and acquire the knowledge and skills to successfully interact with parents.
- Communicate to parents that they are welcome to visit during the school day, and that measures such as visitors passes are there for security reasons—not to make parents feel unwelcome.
- To make parents feel more comfortable visiting the school, post welcome signs in all languages spoken at the school at each entrance and on each classroom door.
- Create a special place in the school that is set aside especially for parents, such as a parent center.

### Not Knowing How to Contribute

#### Roadblock:

- Some parents believe they have talents but don't know whether they are needed or how to contribute them to the school or the PTA.

#### Detour:

- Don't wait for parents to offer to help; seek them out.
- Have teachers and administrators meet to create a list of qualities and contributions that are needed from parents.
- Hold a parent meeting or conduct a survey to determine what kinds of teacher support and school policies parents think are needed to allow for positive parent involvement.
- Faculty and parents could share their list with each other and begin to discuss and form realistic expectations to more effectively use parents' many talents.

### Not Understanding the School System

#### Roadblock:

- Many parents are unfamiliar with the system and therefore do not know what their rights are or how they can become involved.

#### Detour:

- Create a parent handbook covering rules, procedures, policies, and where to find answers to questions.
- Include names and numbers of contact people who can answer questions in specific areas. Include pictures and names of school administrators, staff, teachers, PTA officers, and other contact people.

## Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours, cont.



### Parents in Need

#### Roadblock:

- Parents without adequate resources often feel overwhelmed.
- Families suffering from economic stress must address their own needs for food, clothing, and shelter before they can see clear to become more involved in their children's education.

#### Detour:

- Provide information to help parents access and secure the health and social services they need for themselves and their families.
- Schools can work out agreements with social and health agencies to provide services at the school through school-based clinics or near the school in community-based clinics.
- Schools can develop and distribute to parents a directory containing information on available services and resources in the community and how to access them.
- After families' personal needs are met, schools can then help parents become involved in the education of their children.

### Child Care

#### Roadblock:

- Child care may not be offered at meetings or school functions.
- At the same time, parents may be discouraged from bringing their children to events.

#### Detour:

- Find an available room for child care at the meeting site.
- Ask PTA members, community members, school service clubs, or other parents to volunteer to provide child care on a rotating basis.
- Hire high school or college students in child development classes or child-care professionals in the community to provide child care and, if appropriate, charge parents a nominal fee.
- Adhere to state-mandated child/adult ratios to provide safe, quality care.

### Language

#### Roadblock:

- Parents who don't speak English may not understand newsletters, fliers, or speakers at meetings.

#### Detour:

- Provide printed materials that are sent home and passed out at meetings in all languages spoken by the families in the school.
- The school and surrounding community may need to identify and help secure interpreters and translators for workshops and meetings.
- Another option is to have group activities and social times held in the same room and then have parents of the same language group break off into smaller groups in different rooms for more in-depth discussion. Have all parents come together at the end of the meeting and have the bilingual reporter for each group share what was discussed.

## Barriers to Parent Involvement: Roadblocks and Detours, cont.



### Special Needs

#### Roadblock:

- Parents with disabilities may find it difficult or feel uncomfortable attending and contributing at meetings.

#### Detour:

- Make sure that your school is accessible for everyone and hold meetings or events in a space that is accommodating to parents with disabilities.
- Provide someone to sign for deaf or hearing impaired parents, if requested.

### Transportation

#### Roadblock:

- Lack of transportation or access to parking at the school keeps parents from visiting or attending school activities.

#### Detour:

- Work with the school to make a block of spaces in the parking lot “for visitors only.”
- Bus parents to special evening events following regular bus routes or have group stops for pickups and drop-offs.
- Form carpools to provide transportation to parents without cars. Hold events in community locations that are easy to get to and are near public transportation.
- If parents can not attend, provide a home visit or a phone call to inform parents and keep them involved.

# Barriers for PTAs to Overcome



## The PTA Mission

- To support and speak on behalf of children and youth in the schools, in the community, and before governmental bodies and other organizations that make decisions affecting children
- To assist parents in developing the skills they need to raise and protect their children
- To encourage parent and public involvement in the public schools of this nation

If PTAs are to uphold the PTA Mission, it is important to try and overcome barriers. Following are examples of such efforts taken from material developed by the San Diego Unified PTA Council's Project Hope.

## Snobbery and Exclusion

### Roadblock:

- Many parents still view PTA or other parent groups as isolated and established cliques that exclude minorities and newcomers.

### Detour:

- Actively seek new members that represent the school community. Barriers to outreach—such as insensitivity to the needs of a particular group or modifications to plans that are inappropriate for a specific group—can not be addressed and discussed without representatives of that group on school committees or parent groups.
- Talk with other organizations, read books, or attend workshops to find appropriate ways to reach out to specific populations and make your school groups more inclusive.

## Resistance to Change

### Roadblock:

- Some PTA members, school administrators, and teachers may resist the idea of PTAs functioning in roles other than providing hospitality and financial support for school needs.

### Detour:

- National PTA was founded more than 100 years ago with a mission to advocate for and to educate others on issues affecting children and families. PTA leaders at all levels should look at current PTA rules and customs that may hinder effective parent involvement and interfere with PTA's original purpose.
- PTAs need to work with educators to discuss how PTAs can involve parents in advocacy and create home-school partnerships to unite efforts to address the needs of parents and children.

## Lack of Sufficient Training

### Roadblock:

- Many present PTA leaders come into their positions with little or no advocacy or leadership experience.

### Detour:

- Seek and provide ongoing training for PTA members at all levels in the areas of leadership, advocacy, communication, and the PTA philosophy, so that they can effectively serve in their roles and accomplish the PTA Mission.

# Reaching Out to Specific Populations



## Culturally Diverse Families

- Schools should review research and learn about families' cultural and social values and expectations regarding school systems.
- Developing a better understanding of families' cultures can help correct misconceptions and stereotypes and make schools more sensitive to families' needs.
- Schools can show respect for cultures by making an effort not to plan school events on religious and cultural holidays.
- Schools also can explain to parents how U.S. schools work, offer adults English as a second language classes, help parents prepare for citizenship, and hold school events to share culture through food and music.
- Schools also can include ethnic community leaders in school improvement efforts and recruit, train, and hire bilingual parents to be paraprofessionals and liaisons to families (U.S. Department of Education 1996).
- Any outreach provided to diverse families should focus on the family and not just individual members, promote a family's self-sufficiency, and emphasize their assets (Chang et al. 1994).

## Fathers

- Fathers often are forgotten in parent involvement programs. Yet, it is critical for schools to involve dads in meaningful ways in their children's education (Brimhall and West 1997).
- More mothers are now in the labor force. And in 2 million homes nationwide, fathers are the only parent living with their children. There is a growing recognition of the importance of fathers being involved in children's development. Schools need to try and include fathers in school events, meetings, conferences, and so forth, and actively seek a balance of mothers and fathers to serve on all school committees.
- PTA members and educators can ask fathers to help form dads clubs as well as recruit other men in the community as volunteers.
- To help fathers, PTAs and schools can work with local employers to adopt family friendly policies that would allow fathers the time to be more involved at their children's school.

## Single and Working Parents

- An increasing number of children live in single-parent and two-working-parents households due to many different circumstances, such as divorce or death. There are almost 15 million single-parent households nationwide. The outreach effort should be varied.
- If one parent is not living in the same home as his or her children, educators can send information about the children and the school to both parents, or have joint or separate parent-teacher conferences for both parents.
- Schools can offer support groups and workshops to single parents to help them and their children cope with the stress of a separation, a divorce, or a death.
- PTA members can extend friendship and help to single parents by including them in carpools and child-care cooperatives and offering them information about community services.
- Schools can hold meetings, events, and conferences in the evenings or on weekends as well as offer before- and after-school programs, potlucks, and brown bag lunches.

# Reaching Out to Key Players— Principals and Teachers



To help people get involved, it takes the commitment of everyone to reach out, listen to each other, and work together. Each of these—the principal, teachers, the school board, the superintendent, and public officials—should be considered as partners who can make important and unique contributions to this process.

## The Principal's Role

The principal's leadership sets the tone and shapes the culture for the entire school. The principal has a pivotal role in establishing a foundation to bring about individual school changes and successes. The principal's ideas and actions can provide the financial support as well as the motivation to elevate the professionalism and morale of the teachers and bring the entire school staff and faculty into the process of promoting strong parent-school-community partnerships.

- To work with principals, PTA leaders can request regular meetings to keep their principals informed, to seek input about upcoming activities, to discuss concerns and issues, and to work out problems and misunderstandings.
- PTAs can ask them to serve on their committees and have PTA representatives serve on site-based management councils. In this way, PTA can have input into annual reports and school budgets, policies and school codes, schoolwide goals, and program planning.
- Two-way, ongoing communication is a key to working with administrators. PTAs should consider the following three questions as they begin to establish partnerships with principals.
  1. What can PTA do to benefit all children and families at the school?
  2. What can the principal do to help PTA accomplish its goals?
  3. What can PTA and the principal do together to achieve success for all children and families?

Demonstrating a commitment to work with principals in areas that have traditionally been their sole responsibility can establish a climate where the door is open to the principals' reciprocal support of programs important to PTAs—parent involvement.

## Teachers' Role

Teachers are a crucial link in the partnership between schools and parents. Positive parent-teacher relationships enhance parent involvement and benefit teachers. PTA can provide a bridge between parents and teachers and help build a positive relationship between the two.

- While working with teachers, it is important for PTAs and principals to acknowledge teachers' expertise and the enormity of their work. Set reasonable goals for teacher participation, and then build from there.
- PTAs can work together with principals to advocate for teachers by helping the community understand the importance of supporting teachers' continuing professional education, especially in parent involvement and shared decision making.
- PTAs and teachers can then work together to support teachers' efforts to work with parents. PTAs can provide informal occasions for teachers and parents to get to know each other as individuals and partners.
- PTAs can further strengthen parent-teacher communication and understanding by providing newsletters as well as workshops, events, and activities that bring these two groups together on a regular basis.

# Reaching Out to Key Players— The School Board and the Superintendent



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## **The School Board's Role**

The school board is responsible for taking the lead in identifying and meeting the community's education needs through the adoption of local school policy. School boards are legally responsible for policies and procedures that govern the operation of the entire school district. Parents who join PTA can become better informed and gain the advocacy skills needed to work with school boards. Since the support of the school board is crucial to moving a parent/family involvement agenda forward, it is vital for PTAs to reach out to this group.

- PTAs can ask school board members to help plan or attend PTA conferences, workshops, and programs to gain a better understanding of the purpose and importance of PTA's work.
- PTAs can invite school board members to participate in meetings and committees.
- PTAs also can appoint a PTA liaison to attend school board meetings and ask to serve on school board advisory committees in order to communicate their concerns, become active in the decision-making process, and bring back information on current issues that may require PTA study and action.
- Liaisons can lay the groundwork for forming a better understanding between the two groups. Liaisons also can encourage parents to attend meetings and become knowledgeable about and vote in school board elections. School boards can do a better job in meeting community needs when they are supported and challenged to do better by a well-informed and involved community.

## **The Superintendent's Role**

Even if PTA establishes a good relationship with the school board, the success of all these efforts can be affected by the openness and influence of the superintendent. As chief executive officer of the school district, the superintendent is the education leader of the entire community and interacts with the school board, principals, teachers, and parents. The superintendent ultimately sets the tone for how the school district as a whole responds to parents and families. The school board makes the policies, but the superintendent supports the development of districtwide policies and helps the board identify goals for the schools.

The superintendent interprets how policies will be used to support principals and teachers, and creates a school culture that will affect how parents are viewed and treated. Having the support of the superintendent promotes good site-based decision making with active parent involvement. Before PTA can become a powerful partner with the superintendent, it must lay the groundwork. To gain credibility with and respect from the superintendent, PTAs must do the following:

- Understand and learn how to effectively use administrative channels
- Form a partnership with the principal to build good working relationships with teachers, the school board, and others who shape our children's education
- Gain knowledge of school policies and procedures and develop a good understanding of the



# Reaching Out to Key Players—Public Officials



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## Public Officials' Role

PTAs can reach beyond their local school communities to include elected public officials as key players in efforts to increase parent/family involvement in education. Public officials, because they are elected, are generally concerned with listening and responding to their constituents. Elected or appointed officials can include mayors, city council members, state school superintendents and other state education department representatives, state representatives, and governors. These officials have an important role in developing state and national policies and laws. Policies can create or remove barriers to parent/family involvement. Having the support of members of this group opens doors and sets standards for parent involvement in education for local school communities to adopt and implement.

- In reaching out to public officials, PTAs want to build their sense of ownership of the parent involvement issue. This can be accomplished by consulting with and seeking input from policy makers in determining who should be involved in local parent/family involvement efforts.
- PTAs should invite public officials to serve on their planning committees or respond to plans they created.
- PTAs can keep officials informed of what they are doing locally so that public officials understand the importance of PTA efforts and the long-term impact they can have for schools and communities.
- One way to accomplish this is to host a back-to-school day for elected officials so they can have contact with local schools. Establishing this contact and communication can make it easier to discuss developing policies that support greater parent involvement and to ask legislators at the local, state, and federal levels to sponsor these kinds of bills.
- Ultimately, PTAs want to be known by and establish a positive relationship with policy makers so that they can become a resource for them and vice versa.